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New Excavations in the Central and Southern Sectors of *Aeclanum* in 2019 (Comune di Mirabella Eclano, Provincia di Avellino, Regione Campania)

Girolamo F. De Simone and Ben Russell

In 2017 and 2018, the excavations and survey undertaken by the University of Edinburgh and Apolline Project team at *Aeclanum* uncovered abundant evidence of a lively late antique phase in the city. This was clearest in the baths in the north of the city, which were extensively refurbished in the 4th and 5th centuries, and in the theatre, where the substructures of the *cavea* of the disused structure were turned into dwellings (De Simone and Russell 2019a; 2019b). In both sectors, volcanic layers associated with the eruption of Vesuvius in AD 472 were exposed and analysed (De Simone and Russell 2019b). Alongside these excavations, GPR survey revealed much of the urban topography of the city centre, especially its street network, and highlighted a particularly densely built-up sector in the south of the city, running west of the forum (Fig. 1). We are now in a position to be able to reconstruct some of the key structures in the urban landscape and begin to plot their volumes in space (Fig. 2). In 2019, the decision was made to open a new trench in this southern sector, while also returning to two buildings known about since the 1950s: the *macellum* (which we also explored in 2017 (De Simone and Russell 2018)) and the large peristyle house immediately to the north-east of the early Christian basilica. As previously, the project is a collaboration with the Soprintendenza per le provincie di Salerno ed Avellino, the Comune di Mirabella Eclano, the British School at Rome, the Accademia di Belle Arti di Napoli and the Università degli Studi del Sannio at Benevento, and involves specialists from Italy, the UK, Canada, the Czech Republic, the USA, Australia and Japan (for background on the site and project, see De Simone and Russell 2018; 2019a).

New work on the *macellum*

Although the *macellum* was first identified in the 1950s and partially cleared at this point, stratigraphic information from these excavations is lacking (Onorato 1960, 28; Lombardo 1977, 814). Its overall form was made clear during this early work, however: unlike the *macella* at Pompeii or Puteoli, which comprise central *tholoi* set in the middle of rectangular piazzas, the *Aeclanum macellum* consisted of a series of rooms arranged around a circular open-air court. The distinctive layout is paralleled in the second-century AD *macella* at Herdonia (Puglia) and Alba Fucens (Abruzzo) (De Ruyt 1983). The central court of the structure was paved in mosaic, and marble found during the excavations suggest the building was lavishly decorated.

In 2017, Trench 9 was opened at the southern limit of the *macellum* in order to identify the extent of previous excavations that been conducted in this area and reassess the stratigraphy both within and beyond the building. The earliest contexts within this trench comprised the original interior walls of the *macellum* and the tiled floor paving that abutted it. During the late antique period, a series of new walls and floor surfaces were added to the interior of this space, however. A wall arranged diagonally to the exterior wall was added and a new floor surface, consisting of a simple working surface, laid over the earlier tiled floor. The ceramics from the occupation layers on top of this floor dated to the 4th and 5th centuries AD, and indicate that at this date this area of the *macellum* had been turned over to domestic use (De Simone and Russell 2019b; Castaldo *et al.* in press). This confirmed evidence uncovered here in the middle of the 20th century (Tocco Sciarelli 1999, 251). The *macellum*, in sum, like the theatre at the

site, seemed to have become at least partially a residential structure by the time the eruption of AD 472 struck (De Simone and Russell 2019a; 2019b).

In 2019, a new trench (13) was opened on the northern edge of the complex to assess whether the picture uncovered in 2017 was true of the whole structure and to identify whether the building opened on to a road on this side. In this area the same tiled floor of the first phase of the *macellum* was uncovered and one of the original internal partition walls. The excavations also showed that part of the complex in this area was substantially altered, probably in late antiquity, when a new room was created, not on the alignment of the walls of the original *macellum*. Large quantities of animal bones from the occupation layers within this room, mostly comprising cow bones, suggest that butchery still went on in this space, even though the original *macellum* had probably fallen out of use. What this shows is that the relatively straightforward picture that emerged in 2017, of a public building gradually turned over to residential use, was misleading: parts of the *macellum* were certainly transformed into domestic units, probably following the AD 346 earthquake, but other parts of it, including newly-built structures, were still used for the processing and selling of meat.

The peristyle house and southern sector

The so-called ‘Casa con peristilio’ was excavated by Onorato in the 1950s and is the largest known house in the city. It occupied a prominent position at the corner of an insula block on the middle terrace of the city. Based on its finds and architecture it has been dated to the Hadrianic period. However, it was certainly still in use in late antiquity and indeed acquired even more prominence after the construction of the major early Christian basilica immediately to the south-west of it, in the late 4th or more probably in the early 5th century AD (Di Giovanni 1996, 241-250; Lo Pilato 2010, 353-356; Colucci Pescatori 2017, 172-174). The excavators in the 1950s found a glass workshop built in the northern portion of this house and so assumed that after the AD 346 earthquake it was turned over to industrial production, like some other areas of the centre of the city (Colucci Pescatori and Di Giovanni 1999, 32-33). During the 1950s, however, little attention was paid to dating the walls of the house via stratigraphic excavation; they were assumed to be mostly Hadrianic because they demarcated a high-end peristyle house. In 2019, therefore, two trenches (14 and 15) were opened within the house to explore the dating of the structure itself.

Trench 14 was located across the threshold between the eastern side of the peristyle court and a secondary room opening on to it. Beneath the pavement level that the 1950s excavators stopped at, a series of previous walls were uncovered, including a substantial retain wall, probably used for terracing, and an ephemeral structure apparently built from unmortared river pebbles, which is perhaps the footing of a mudbrick wall. The ceramics from the layers immediately beneath the pavement and the foundation trenches of the walls confirm that they were built in the Imperial period, probably in the 2nd century. However, the superstructures of the walls themselves are certainly later and include large quantities of re-used materials, especially roof tiles. Similar results were recovered from Trench 15, which was opened on the inside of the exterior wall of the house, adjacent to the main doorway leading from the street to the peristyle court. The date of this rebuilt cannot be pinpointed with precision but must have been prompted by a major event and the earthquake of AD 346, which caused devastation at the site, is the likely culprit. Significantly, the rebuild of the structure as a large peristyle house indicates that it remained an elite *domus* into at least the late 4th century and perhaps beyond. The fact that the north-east corner of the new basilica abutted the south-west corner of this house might even indicate that the residence had an ecclesiastical function, perhaps as the home

of a high-ranking church official. The glass workshop and other evidence of industrial activity identified in the 1950s, therefore, is more likely to date to after the AD 472 eruption rather than to the late 4th century, when the house was still needed as a luxury residence.

The final trench opened during the 2019 campaign targetted an anomaly revealed in the 2018 GPR survey. The plan of the structures visible in the GPR results resembled domestic structures and indeed the new excavations largely confirmed this. Although only a single trench could be opened this year, the upstanding walls uncovered suggest that the preservation in this sector of the site is considerably better than other areas. Trench 16 explored an inner room of a large residence, which had been filled in by multiple phases of wall collapse. Fragments of fresco from this collapse layers indicate a high level of decoration. The ceramics from the layers sealing these collapses contained pottery dating to the late 4th century, implying that the structure was destroyed in the middle of the 4th century but then never rebuilt.

As in 2018, the excavations at Aeclanum have revealed a complicated and highly dynamic late antique urban landscape. In the *macellum* and the peristyle house, the new work has forced us to reconsider some of the assumptions previously made about these buildings. The *macellum* was certainly transformed in the 4th century but this transformation was not total: people now lived in the building but at least part of it, which seems to have been rebuilt in this period, was still seemingly used for meat processing. The peristyle house, a building previously thought to have been Hadrianic and turned into an industrial area after AD 346, now seems to have been comprehensively rebuilt at this point, perhaps in connection with the nearby church, and to have only shifted function later. Finally, the new excavations in the southern sector show the potential of the remains here and the fact that even a short distance from the peristyle house, evidence for a structure that experienced an entirely different fate can be uncovered. These various strands of evidence show a city in flux between the twin disasters of AD 346 and AD 472, and an urban landscape that defies simple categorisation.

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Figure captions

Fig. 1: Plan of the central and southern sectors of *Aeclanum* showing standing or excavated remains (black), geophysical anomalies (dark grey), and the reconstructed street network (light grey) (image: Josef Souček)

Fig. 2: Aerial photograph of *Aeclanum* with added reconstructions of key public buildings (image: Josef Souček).